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Karen Wells
_Space and Culture_ 2007; 10; 195
DOI: 10.1177/1206331206298789

The online version of this article can be found at: http://sac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/2/195
Symbolic Capital and Material Inequalities

Memorializing Class and “Race” in the Multicultural City

Karen Wells
Birkbeck College, University of London

This article explores the symbolism of three objects that memorialize Brixton as a multiclass and multiracial space while eliding the inequalities that racialized and classed identities are inscribed with. Although each of the three objects were formed to commemorate very different moments in the history of British capitalism and in the struggle against apartheid, they are linked both by their location in this diverse neighborhood and by the ways that they smooth over the contradictions of the persistence, evident in public space, of sharp political and economic inequalities. Despite the very different intentions that lay behind the erection of these commemorative objects, they are inscribed with a shared claim that not only can a particular kind of British capitalism coexist with liberty and (racial) equality, but it is a precondition of both.

Keywords: antiapartheid; capitalism; memorial; class; race

When South African President Nelson Mandela visited Brixton in 1996, he affirmed its identity as a “black suburb” (Rossouw, 1996) and Britain’s “most famously ethnic area” (Hamilton, 1996). Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, accompanied him. It is testimony to the self-conscious representation of Brixton as the heart of Black Britain that of these two, President Mandela was the more venerated. Prince Charles was not the first Prince of Wales to visit Brixton. In 1893, another Prince of Wales, the future King Edward, attended the opening ceremony of Brixton’s Tate Library, named after its main
benefactor, Henry Tate, the sugar manufacturer. In these two events, separated by more than a century, there is a tale to be told about how commemorative events and objects smooth over the contradictions of a public sphere differentiated, if not fractured, by class and “race.” This article explores the symbolism of three memorial objects that code Brixton as a multiclass, multiracial, yet unified space, as do these two events. One of the objects is a statue of Henry Tate, who died 6 years after the event mentioned above: the inauguration of the Tate Library, Brixton. The statue itself and the semiotics of the space in which it is sited reference a distinctive story about (British) capitalism that hides the exploitative character of capitalism beneath a veneer of art and knowledge. The other objects are a sculpture commemorating the Sharpeville Massacre and another commemorating the Soweto student uprising. Both of these reference key moments in the history of the struggle against apartheid. Representations of both events have become part of the iconography of that struggle. At least from a British point of view, that iconography also includes memorializing Nelson Mandela’s state visit to Britain. If Tate’s memorial seeks to assert the righteousness of capitalism while masking the inequality of class relations, the antiapartheid memorials use the iconography of the struggle for a nonracial state to assert that the struggle against racial exclusion has already been won in this multiracial neighborhood.

Refining Capitalism

Annie Coombes (2004) has commented that contemporary capitalism uses “the cachet of cultural capital and its power to deaden the memory of the links between capitalist entrepreneurs and oppressive political regimes” (p. 239). Capitalist firms have also used cultural or symbolic capital to mask the exploitative relations that underpin their accumulation of private wealth. Henry Tate’s transformation of economic capital into symbolic capital through, inter alia, his sponsorship of free libraries and his support for a national gallery of British art (now the Tate Britain) is one such instance of how British capitalism comes to be cloaked in the cloth of philanthropy. Tate, in a perfect example of how “sweetness and power” (Mintz, 1986) often worked together, inscribed his name and a very refined history of sugar onto the landscape of Britain.

The Tate and Lyle motto is “Out of the strong came forth sweetness.” It is a reference to the biblical story in which Samson sets the Philistines a riddle to solve: How can sweetness come out of strength? On his journey home, he had passed the rotting body of a dead lion swarming with bees and honey. This was the solution to the riddle. From the Tate galleries of Liverpool, London, and St. Ives to the Tate libraries in Liverpool and London, Tate succeeded in lifting money made from sugar out of the rotten carcass of British capitalism. The taint of exploitation has infected Tate’s reputation, but it is not the exploitation of free labor but of the violence of slavery.

When I first noticed Henry Tate’s statue and the inscription of Tate above the entrance to the library, they struck me as incongruous symbols in this postcolonial space. I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that Tate, of Tate and Lyle, had some connection to the transatlantic slave trade and that when this statue was erected, Brixton was a resolutely White bourgeois neighbourhood. Tate’s statue, I thought, paid homage to bourgeois space, by way of the commemoration of the life of one of its most emblematic sons.

These assumptions, both about Henry Tate’s involvement in slavery and the class character of turn-of-the-(20th)-century Brixton proved to be wrong. Brixton’s modern
development was simultaneously bourgeois and working class. All the spaces for the expression of bourgeois tastes were here, but the advent of the railway connecting Brixton to central London in the 1860s encouraged the settlement of a working-class population. Tate’s memorial was not a simple testament to the uniformly bourgeois character of end-of-the-century Brixton, because no such uniformity existed. What Tate’s statue is testament to is the ability of bourgeois forces to shape the symbolic environment of a multiclass neighborhood by transforming private capital into public goods. In this way, Henry and Amy Tate, his wife, inscribed capitalism, and specifically sugar production, onto the landscape of London under the sign of bourgeois culture.

THE SIGN OF BOURGEOIS CULTURE

Henry Tate’s statue has stood in the square in front of Brixton’s library since 1905. The bust that stands on top of the plinth is a copy of an original in what was then the National Gallery of Art. It was erected at the end of the “monument mania” of the 19th century, “an era when there was a general belief that the great and the good should be commemorated in this public form” (Pickering & Tyrell, 2004, p. 5). When it was unveiled, it stood in the center of what was then called Tate Gardens, and is now called, at least officially, the Oval, Brixton. The statue was commissioned and paid for by public subscription as a contribution to Lady Tate’s purchase and landscaping of the area in front of the Tate Library. The Tate Library was so called because Henry Tate had paid £15,000, the cost of the land and the building, on the condition that the local rate was increased to ensure that the library would be stocked and maintained. A poll of the ratepayers in 1889 voted against increasing the rate from ½d. to 1d., but this was reversed by a subsequent poll. The architect of the building, Sidney R. J. Smith, was Tate’s personal choice. He also designed the National Art Gallery building at Pimlico and the Tate Library, Streatham. The inscription above the library entrance reads “TATE/Central Free/Public/LIBRARY.” The library, as the inscription implies, was intended to be for the edification of the working classes. The free-library movement
appealed to the financial interests of the middle class and the aspiring working class. Kenneth Povry, in his 1957 talk to the Libraries Association on Sir Henry Tate as a benefactor of libraries, cites a leaflet from the free-libraries campaign that frames its appeal in this way. It says, “Fellow Tradesmen, you will gain more trade and better customers, when people use reading rooms and libraries and spend less time in music halls and beer shops. Vote ‘yes’ for free libraries and reading rooms” (Povry, 1957, p. 6). When the library was first built, the land to the front of it formed part of Rush Common and was used for sheep grazing. Lady Tate’s purchase of a section of this common land can be thought of as one of the last acts of enclosure but one that used private capital to retain land in the public domain while buying the right to determine what that “public” space should be. Part of the legacy of this sleight of hand has been to ensure the continued presence of Henry Tate in this space “in perpetuity,” as the terms of Lady Tate’s endowment of the land to the Local Authority states.

When Tate’s memorial statue was first erected, it was placed at the center of the gardens, which were landscaped so as to make it appear that Tate was gazing across the town center, lord of all he surveyed. Lambeth Town Hall was opened in 1908 by the Prince and Princess of Wales (later King George V and Queen Mary). The building was commissioned following a competition, and the foundation stone was laid in 1906. Although Tate’s statue was erected before the town hall was built, it is surely no coincidence that the positioning of Tate and the layout of the gardens puts Tate at the center of a space soaked in references to bourgeois culture. He looks at the town hall, the center of the new political authority of Lambeth (formed in 1900), and stands midway on a line from the town hall to the library. Edwin Jones, justice of the peace and owner of Bon Marche, the first department store in Britain, donated the clock on the town hall tower. The sculptors at the four corners of the tower represent art, literature, science, and justice, the four secular gods of the Enlightenment.

The stipulation in the terms of Lady Tate’s endowment that Tate’s statue be left in the gardens “in perpetuity” has apparently guaranteed Tate an enduring place in the iconography of Brixton’s landscape. He has been moved at least twice, and the elaborate pedestal on which the plinth once stood has now gone. The landscape is still recognizably the one he has surveyed for the last century. Soon, in another redevelopment of the gardens, this time designed to discourage the people who currently use it for public drinking, Tate will be moved again. The memorial will stand to the side of what is intended to be the main pathway from the town hall to the library. It will have uplighting, thus increasing both its prominence and its semiotic significance in the square. This is unlikely to be the last time Tate is moved. Landscape architects have been appointed to develop a design that will bring together the Tate Gardens, Windrush Square, and St. Matthew’s Peace Gardens. In explaining the rationale for the redesign of the town center, the Tate Gardens and Windrush Square were described as being “at the heart of Brixton and black Britain’s history” (Architecture and Urbanism Unit). Sugar, if not slavery, is surely what is being used to connect the Tate Gardens to “black Britain’s history.” An extraordinary claim in many ways, particularly in its positioning of a White capitalist as being at the heart of Black Britain.

**SUGAR AND SLAVERY**

Inscribed on the plinth of Tate’s statue is the dedication to “Sir Henry Tate, Upright Merchant, Wise Philanthropist, Born 11 March 1815, Died 8th December 1899.”
Philanthropy is a key word in the lexicon of enlightened capitalism; its associations with charity and benevolence, particularly toward the poor, distances capitalism from its role in producing poverty. (Corporate social responsibility would be a contemporary equivalent.) Given the efforts of the Tates to use the alchemy of symbolic capital to display a benevolent, progressive capitalism, Tate has been haunted with a more damning coupling than that between capitalism and exploitation: the coupling of sugar with slavery.

I am not alone in my assumption that Tate's wealth was derived from slave-produced sugar. In 1996, the director of a Liverpool arts association, Ibrahim Thompson, claimed in a letter to The Guardian that "Tate built its empire from profits made from slave sugar plantations" (Thompson, 1996, p. 12). In refuting this claim, Simon Wilson (1996), then curator of the Tate Gallery, noted that Tate built his first refinery 40 years after British slavery was abolished. Thompson responded to this letter with the following comments: "Sir Henry Tate made his vast fortune as a Liverpool merchant and sugar broker long before his [sic] refined 'sugar cubism.'" In Art, Space and the City, Malcolm Miles (1996), discussing the Tate statue and noting the exchange between Thompson and Wilson, reasserts the sugar–slavery pairing: Tate, he says, made his "fortune from the development of the sugar cube, sugar being a trade which depended on slavery" (p. 66). Further evidence of the persistence of this taint is found in Jon Newman's (2002) Windrush Forbears, in which he says that Tate and Lyle's "Liverpool and London sugar businesses relied first on slave and then on free plantation labour in the Caribbean" (p. 7). Antony Hugill, in his 1978 hagiography of the firm, addresses these assumptions when he comments that there was "no history of Tate and Lyle involvement in the slave trade, for slavery had been abolished a century earlier."

The evidence for (Henry) Tate or (Abram) Lyle (the two firms merged in 1921) having made their fortune from slave labor is extremely tenuous. Tate came from a lower-middle-class family; his father was a Unitarian clergyman from Newcastle. He was apprenticed at the age of 13 as a grocer to his brother in 1832, the year before British slavery was abolished. He stayed in the grocery business until 1861, when he sold his shops. He had bought shares in a small Liverpool refinery in 1859, and he bought another in 1862. Not until 1873—5 years after the abolition of American slavery—did he buy the refinery at Love Lane, Liverpool. The sugar for British sugar production in the last part of the 19th century was a combination of colonial sugar and subsidized beet sugar imported from Europe. The combined effect of the abolition of the slave trade, the production of beet sugar in Europe, and the success of the free-trade lobby in Britain, which ended protection for West Indian planters, was the virtual collapse of West Indian sugar production. After the First World War, the West Indian industry recovered to some degree, but by 1928, low prices forced numerous plantations into receivership. In 1937, Tate and Lyle, in a move designed to evade British government control of domestic sugar production, bought plantations in Jamaica and Trinidad. This is the first time that Tate or Tate and Lyle were directly involved in West Indian sugar production. In Trinidad, the management and control of the firm were left with local managers. In Jamaica, Tate and Lyle formed a subsidiary, the West Indian Sugar Company, which controlled a third of Jamaica's sugar production (Chalmin, 1990).

Lyle's entanglement with slavery is perhaps more direct, but even this has to be gleaned by reading between the lines of his family background. He went into sugar refining in 1865, buying a refinery with some associates. The capital for this was raised by a loan of £100,000 through the Bank of Scotland. This partnership was dissolved in 1880, when Lyle bought a plot of land in Silvertown, London, to build a refinery. The only evidence that Lyle's fortune was built on slavery comes not from his direct
involvement in sugar refining but from the history of cooperage, shipbuilding, and sail weaving of the family in Greenock, Scotland. Greenock owes its economic growth to being a center of the Scottish imports of cotton and sugar from the West Indies.

In other words, the taint of slavery on the sugar industry, and therefore on Tate’s and Lyle’s personal fortunes, comes by way of their connections with two of the centers of early British industrialization and the interweaving of British industry with colonization. This coupling of capitalism with slavery is perhaps more interesting than proving or disproving that Tate’s and Lyle’s wealth in particular were or were not the product, however belated, of slavery. It is interesting because it raises the scepter that slavery, far from being aberrant to British industrial capitalism, was one of the conditions of its possibility. This is similar to Sidney Mintz’s (1986) point that it is impossible to “detach the plantations from the emergent world economy that spawned them, or to rule out their contribution to the accumulation of capital in world centers” (p. 60). Indeed, Mintz argues that plantations should be regarded as a “remarkably early functioning of industry in European history (overseas colonial history, at that). They throw rather provocative light on the common assertion that Europe ‘developed’ the colonial world after the European heartland” (p. 52). Similarly, Eric Williams (1964) argued in *Capitalism and Slavery* that the former was dependent on the latter. These claims are by no means broadly accepted among economic historians, but that, in one sense, does not really matter. What does matter is that as a discourse of the origins of capitalism and therefore of Tate’s wealth, it contrasts sharply with what his statue and the semiotics of this site assert. The connections made at this site between knowledge, art, science, and philanthropy and being an “upright merchant” assert that capitalism does not rest on brutality, exploitation, and inequality but on “patience, brains, and skill,” to quote the doggerel printed in the *Brixton Free Press* newspaper’s report of the unveiling ceremony.

Tate’s wealth was not built on slavery, but it was built on the exploitation of nominally free labor. If the refusal to accept that Tate’s accumulation of capital was made possible without slave labor is interesting for the connections it proposes between capitalism and slavery, two modes of production normally considered antithetical to one another, it is also interesting that the exploitation of free labor, the sine qua non of capitalism, is not in itself considered to be sufficient reason to challenge the philanthropic claims or ethical legitimacy of capitalist firms. Symbolic capital, such as that which Tate’s endowments and his memorial statue represent, might be thought of as a fetish in exactly the same way that, as Marx (1867/1999) would have it, the commodity is a fetish: It conceals the underlying social relations that made its production possible. When cultural critics seek to reveal these underlying social relations, they have turned not to the capitalist relations that made the accumulation of private capital possible but to another set of social relations whose status as one the most inhumane forms of labor exploitation is incontrovertible, that of slavery.

Tate’s endowments were a very successful strategy for translating economic wealth into specific symbolic and cultural forms. These forms—public art and knowledge—sought to erase the exploitation that generated the private accumulation of wealth under capitalism. Tate’s statue and indeed his other public endowments give a particular narrative of capitalism. In this narrative, capitalism is progressive. Wealth is not accumulated through the exploitation of nominally free labor but through the diligence, intelligence, thrift, and above all, the moral stature of the capitalist. A key word in this elision of oppression and exploitation is *philanthropy*. In Tate’s endowments and the memorial that commemorates and celebrates this “philanthropy” is a discourse of benign capitalism, of a distinctively
British capitalism that is inclusive, developmental, and redistributive. These discursive claims are there in the demeanor of his bust, the inscription on the plinth, and the semiotics of the space in which it is located. They are there in the referencing of knowledge (in the library) and of art, literature, science, and justice (in the town hall). Ironically, attempts to wrest Tate’s accumulation of wealth out of the domain of normal capitalist relations and insert it into slavery confirm rather than contest these representations of (normal) capitalism as a benign and progressive force. Nonetheless, the continual contestation of the legitimacy or otherwise of Tate’s wealth speaks to the incompleteness of Tate’s attempt to erase the exploitation that is inscribed within global capitalism.

The Past Is Another Country

Where Tate currently stands, he throws a shadow across a more recent monument. This monument is to the Sharpeville Massacre and was unveiled in 1987. The Sharpeville Massacre monument in the Tate Gardens and a sculpture in a park on the other end of Brixton High Street that commemorates the Soweto uprising, together with the plaque marking Mandela’s visit to Brixton, form part of an orchestration of space that connects the multiracial spaces of Brixton to the struggle against apartheid. This connection is made by presenting the multiracial spaces of Brixton as a model for postapartheid South Africa. In this narrative, Brixton has achieved what the African National Congress was fighting for: racial equality in a multiracial state. Racism is distanced from Brixton both temporally and spatially: The past is another country. If the transformation of private capital into symbolic capital cloaks the social relations of capitalism and the differential impacts of capitalism on middle-class and working-class people, borrowing the iconography of the South African struggle unifies multiracial presences in Brixton without either acknowledging or remedying racialized inequalities.

SHARPEVILLE: LIBERTY AND (RACIAL EQUALITY)

The monument is a rectangular block standing about a meter high. The top surface is angled and a metal plaque is set into it. The plaque has an engraving of a map of Africa. Inside the map the words SHARPEVILLE / 21st MARCH 1960 are written from West Africa to the Sudan. An engraving of a group of people raising a flag appears at the bottom of the map, above South Africa, so that the country the flag is being raised in on the map is Mozambique, not South Africa. This semiotically draws together the successful resistance against White rule in Mozambique with the (then) ongoing struggle in South Africa. The iconography of the flag raising clearly references the famous photograph of the U.S. flag being raised on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima in the last phase of the Second World War. The casualties at Iwo Jima were horrific: 22,000 Japanese soldiers and 6,525 American soldiers were killed. One in three U.S. Marines were killed or wound. Beneath the map is the text “THEY DIED SO OTHERS MIGHT LIVE.” Although in quotation marks, it appears that this is not a quote but a slogan intended to evoke the notion of a just war and a heroic sacrifice. Embedded on the front surface, a smaller metal plaque reads, “This plaque was unveiled by/His Excellency Mr Shridath S. Ramphai/Commonwealth Secretary-General./The dedication was performed by Archbishop Trevor Huddleston/23rd June 1987.”

Monuments demand a type of generality that allows them to be animated by the interests of a general “audience.” Their polyvocal or polysemiotic character is an
inevitable corollary of their longevity. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the monument yields little information about what Sharpeville is and what happened on March 21, 1960. A brief account of the place and the event should suffice to show that the references to Iwo Jima and World War II seem to overstate the significance of this event. Sharpeville is a township in South Africa about 30 miles south of Johannesburg. It was one of the focal points of the Pan Africanist Congress’s (PAC) campaign against pass laws. PAC had organized a strike against passes to take place on March 21, 1960. The intention was for people to refuse to carry passes on that day and to present themselves for arrest at the local police station. On the day, 10,000 protestors marched to the police station, and PAC leaders went up to the police station to ask to be let in and be arrested. After some delay, the leaders were let into the police station, and shortly afterward, the police fired on the crowd, killing 69 and injuring nearly 200 people. Antigovernment demonstrations followed throughout urban South Africa. A state of emergency was declared in April, and more than 18,000 people were arrested. For the first time, the UN Security Council called on the regime to “abandon its policies of apartheid and racial discrimination” (United Nations Security Council, 1960). In 1966, March 21st was designated International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination by the United Nations. The South African government banned oppositional political parties, including the South African Communist Party, the ANC, and the PAC. Both the PAC and the ANC began military campaigns; the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), started operations in December 1961. Two years later, at the Rivonia trail, eight of the members of the MK high command were sentenced to life imprisonment: Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Dennis Goldberg, Ahmed Kathrada, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, and Elias Motsoaledi.

The Sharpeville monument in Brixton, through its image and text, simultaneously references the antiapartheid struggle, antifascism through the references to World War II, and a pan-African model of anticolonialism in its use of an unmarked map of Africa to anticipate the liberation of South Africa from the last vestiges of colonial rule. In “The Era of Commemoration,” Pierre Nora remarks, “No event since World War II has been fully assimilable to a unified national memory” (Nora, 1996, p. 616). This may be true in France, where the legitimacy of decolonization is far from settled, but in Britain, formal decolonization is no longer contested at the national level. As for apartheid, by 1987, South Africa was an international pariah state. Nonetheless, for these motifs of resistance to be meaningful in the specific context of Brixton, they have been emptied of the specificity of their time and place, being treated instead as universal symbols of liberty, (racial) equality, and fraternity: the symbolism, in short, of the bourgeois politics of the Enlightenment.

Sharpeville was a significant moment in the history of apartheid, but as was clear by 1987, it in no way succeeded in bringing down the apartheid regime or raising the flag of racial equality on South African soil. Soweto in 1976 was another significant landmark in the antiapartheid struggle, and it is also commemorated in Brixton. The overstating of the significance of Sharpeville stands in sharp contrast to the understating of the significance of Soweto in the sculpture The First Child. Whereas the Sharpeville monument was erected several years before the end of apartheid, and at a point when it was far from certain that the apartheid regime was vulnerable, the Soweto sculpture was unveiled in 1998, 4 years after the transition to majority rule. However, both the Soweto memorial and the Sharpeville memorial in their use of text and image empty out the specificity of these events. The polysemiosis of the Sharpeville monument brings into play World War II, decolonization, and pan-Africanism. Although these references speak to an ideology
of liberty and (racial) equality, they are also clearly references to struggle and active resistance. The Soweto sculpture, in contrast, omits the signs of struggle and resistance, offering instead a Christian idiom of innocent suffering, and the semiotics of the written text and the site collapse Black identities together, not simply under the sign of Africa, as the Sharpeville memorial does, but under the sign of a, albeit rather veiled, transnational or globalized identity.

SOWETO: REDEMPTION THROUGH SUFFERING

The 198 Gallery, then a gallery for Black artists, commissioned the sculpture from Raymond Watson, a Jamaican sculptor. It stands at a corner of a park in Brixton that is named after the African American Jazz musician Max Roach. It is a representation in welded steel of a photograph that is iconic of the struggle against apartheid. The photograph shows Mbuyisa Makhubo carrying Hector Peterson’s dead body with his sister, Antoinette Sithole, running along beside him.

It is from the referencing of this image that the sculpture derives its affective power, such as it is. Two metal plaques are fixed to the plinth. One, on the right side, says “First Child.” The other, on the left side, says

Dedicated by Bishop Wood of Croydon
to the 116 children who died in Soweto on June 16th 1976
and unveiled on June 13th 1998 by
His Excellency Happy Mahlangu,
Deputy Commissioner for South Africa.
Supported by the Borough of Lambeth, Brixton Challenge,
National Lottery and private donations.
Commissioned by the 198 Gallery.

SUPPORTED BY
THE NATIONAL LOTTERY
THROUGH
THE ARTS COUNCIL
OF ENGLAND

So this work references a transnational construction of Black history, possibly within a Christian idiom but in a rather oblique way. Here we have a representation of Hector Peterson being carried through Soweto. Situated in a park named for an African American musician, produced by a Jamaican sculptor, commissioned by a Black arts gallery, erected on the 50th anniversary of Windrush and unveiled by a representative of the postapartheid South African state. On one level, it is clear that the work is an orchestration of key reference points in a transnational Black history or, put another way, in the construction of diverse African, American, Caribbean, and British histories as a unified narrative. However, all of these references to a transnational Black history are only legible to those already “in the know.”

If the “viewer,” more likely, the passerby, has seen the photograph that the sculpture references or knows that the year of the unveiling is also the 50th anniversary of Windrush, then it is possible to have some understanding of the affective intent of the sculpture. If the viewer reads the inscription without knowing what happened at Soweto in 1976, it would be very difficult to imaginatively reconstruct from the text the significance or even the facts of that moment. We are not even told that Soweto is in South Africa, although the recorded presence of the deputy commissioner for South
Africa might make this a likely conclusion to come to. Even the dedication, which could more accurately have been made to the children who were killed in Soweto, does not invite the imaginative reconstruction of resistance to apartheid. Nor, with the exception of the date of the unveiling and the name of the deputy commissioner, is there anything within this work that references the transition to democratic rule in South Africa.

If the orchestration of various signs of Black identity is rather subdued or oblique, the Christian idiom of loss and suffering is less so. *The First Child*, the name of the piece, is perhaps supposed to refer to Hector Peterson’s being the first child to be killed in the Soweto uprising, but in the absence of that knowledge, “*The First Child*” seems to take on a Christian referent. This reading is further encouraged by the sculpture’s having been dedicated by Bishop Wood of Croydon. (A similar reading could be taken from the Sharpeville monument’s having been dedicated by the Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, and indeed his presence lends a moral authority to the claims of a just and heroic struggle.) Above all, the stance of the three protagonists in the sculpture is very reminiscent of Christian iconography. The photograph, of which the sculpture is a three-dimensional representation, owes its power to this symbolism. There were, of course, other photographs taken that day, but it is this one that has endured as an iconic image of innocence betrayed by evil.

The difference in these representations is not to be found within the South African struggle or even within the British antiapartheid movement. It is the politics of representation at a particular point in London politics and the changing demography of Brixton that we can draw on to account for the shift from an iconography of antifascism, anticolonialism, and pan-Africanism to an iconography of Christian loss and redemption. The Sharpeville monument belongs to an era of municipal socialism, when Labour Party councillors saw themselves as engaged in a wider
movement for political justice. Although they were often disparaged as demagogues, they actually drew on what was until then a fairly conventional narrative of labor history in which the unity of the international working class had secured a victory over fascism, made decolonization possible, and would end the last vestiges of imperialism. Ironically, this narrative had none of the antipathy to British capitalism that it is often assumed to contain. Colonization and minority rule in South Africa were obstacles to the globalization of liberal capitalism, not milestones on the road to international socialism. The year that the Brixton monument to Sharpeville was unveiled was also the year in which the British Labour Party finally cut away from labor and embraced liberal capitalism, replacing the symbolism of a blood-soaked red flag with the English rose. When the Soweto sculpture was unveiled, Lambeth was no longer engaged with a radical version of labor history. In the intervening years, the African population in Brixton had increased significantly. With real Africans in public space, dissolving Caribbean identity under the sign of Africa or, indeed, rhetorically supporting the PAC’s demand for a United States of Africa was no longer viable, if it ever had been. The Soweto monument, in its referencing of multiple Black identities—Jamaican, American, South African, and British—does not so much collapse Black identity together under one sign as assemble them together within a boundary of transnationalism.

The orchestration of the iconography of the struggle against apartheid is also intended to place racism at a distance. Racism, these memorials proclaim, happens elsewhere. Slavery is to British capitalism what apartheid is to British racism: the extremes of exploitation and inhumanity that are incontrovertibly wrong. Multiracial Brixton is brought together through its recognition of the immorality of racial exclusion in the context of South Africa. Perhaps the Soweto monument evades the fact that majority rule has been achieved in South Africa because it is the struggle rather than the victory that does the symbolic work of unifying the diversity of Brixton.

Unifying Diversity

Symbolically unifying the diversity of Brixton, a multiracial, multiclass space, has been the work of these commemorative objects. Despite the apparent opposition of their political claims and the separation of Tate’s statue from the iconography of antiapartheid by more than a century, these memorials share in the ideology of bourgeois culture. If Tate’s memorial and the semiotics of its site cover the exploitation and inequalities of capitalism with the mask of science, knowledge, art, justice, and philanthropy, the iconography of antiapartheid in Brixton cloaks the persistence of racial inequality in the borrowed clothes of the South African struggle. In neither instance are the convictions of bourgeois culture challenged. The narrative of these objects is not only that capitalism can coexist with liberty and (racial) equality but also that it is a precondition for the existence of both. This narrative, however, is not transparent. Indeed, the most noticeable aspect of these monuments is that they are ignored. Nor is the widely held assumption that monuments are the repositories of collective memories apparent here. The very diversity of Brixton makes it unlikely that the producers of these monuments and the people who traverse these spaces will have shared interests or shared interpretative resources. Few objects have a transparent legibility, but these objects demand a repertoire of historical knowledge that most people are unlikely to bring to their interpretation. I leave the last word to a young research
participant, a 10-year-old Nigerian British girl who lives in Brixton. When I asked her who she thought the statue in the Tate Gardens was, she looked at him for a few moments and then said, “Nelson Mandela?” (Wells, 2005).

Note

1. Henry Tate entered the sugar industry in 1859, gradually expanding to buy the Love Lane refinery in Liverpool in 1873. Slave trading had been abolished internationally by this date, although slavery continued. Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865; in Cuba, 1886; and in Brazil, 1888. It is possible that the supply of sugar to Tate, until 1888, was produced by enslaved labor.

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Karen Wells is a lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests are in material and visual culture and childhood. She has published articles in the Journal of Consumer Culture, Social and Cultural Geography and Ethnic and Racial Studies. She is the author of the forthcoming book Childhood in a Global Context (Polity).